

## Wisdom for Life: Keep to the Old Roads

Proverbs 4:1-27

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 16, 2020

### Introduction

- ❖ We've been in the book of Proverbs, and we've talking about the subject of wisdom. **We've already talked how being biblically smart is not the same as being biblically wise.** You can be smart in the Bible, but if you don't know what to do with that biblical knowledge – if it's not helping you live a godly life in a healthy fear of the Lord – then you're not yet wise in the Bible.
  - And we've talked about how to get wisdom. We've said how getting wisdom calls for prayer – just as Solomon prayed for wisdom. **But that doesn't means you can just sit back and passively wait for God to zap you with wisdom.**
  
- ❖ **We're told in Proverbs 2:4 that wisdom is something you have to seek like silver – something you search for like hidden treasure.** You won't find silver or hidden treasure just sitting there on the surface waiting for you to crouch over and pick it up. No, you're going to have to dig and exert effort. In the same way, if you want wisdom, you're going to have to dig into Scripture and exert the effort to study it, to understand it, and to store it up in your heart.
  - **This means no one grows biblically wise overnight.** It takes time and concerted effort to find wisdom and get understanding (3:13). To lay hold of it. (3:18). Wisdom won't just drop in your lap. It's not something God zaps us with. **We have to go get it.** Look at chapter 4:5, "*Get wisdom; get insight.*" Look v7, "*The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.*"
  
- ❖ **Now the point I want to make this morning is that getting wisdom is not like your typical approach to learning at school.** When you're in school, you expect to learn something new. Review time is boring. No one likes reviewing past material. We've gone over those lessons countless times. Reviewing is boring. Teach me something new. That's how we assume you get wisdom. We see it as the pursuit of novel ideas.
  - **But what we'll discover in chapter 4 is that we get wisdom – not by researching new theories – but by recollecting old truths.** Getting insight is not about blazing new paths – but about keeping to the old roads, well-trodden by the wise who have gone before. **In other words, being wise has a lot more to do with not forgetting things you were taught and not straying from the path you were set on.**
  
- ❖ We're going to see this lesson emphasized in three different ways in three different sections. Chapter 4 has three clearly demarcated sections. Like in chapter 3, each begins with Solomon, the author, directly addressing his son. So section one is vv1-9; section two is vv10-19; section three is vv20-27. And one commonality in all three is the word "*keep*". V4 – "*keep my commandments, and live.*" V13 – "*Keep hold of instruction; do not let go.*" V21 – "*keep [my words] within your heart.*" V23 – "*keep your heart with all vigilance.*"
  - **So like we said, the emphasis in Proverbs 4 is about not forgetting old truths (keeping it fresh) and not straying from old roads (keeping it straight).** What we see emerging, then, are three related themes related to keeping: Keeping tradition, keeping straight, and keeping wisdom closely guarded.

## Keep the Tradition of Wisdom

- ❖ Let's start with section one in vv1-9. **Here we learn the importance of keeping the tradition of wisdom.** We're introduced to a father speaking to his sons. Now the plural use of "sons" stands out since, in the rest of the book, the father speaks to his son *singular*. But it's likely not that significant. It could just be a reminder that Solomon has more than one son, or it could be a nod to the reading audience (to us) – **reminding us that Proverbs is basically one extended home-schooling lesson between father and son.** And you, the reader, get to listen in and learn.
  
- ❖ Now so far in chapters 1 to 3, we've listened in to a few lessons where the father is passing along his teachings to his son (1:8; 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21). **The difference in chapter 4 is that the father begins to draw from a deeper well.** Solomon begins to pass along lessons that he learned as a child, taught by his own father, King David. Listen to vv3-4, *"<sup>3</sup>When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, <sup>4</sup>he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live."*
  - So here we have three generations represented: grandfather, father, and son. And there's a tradition being passed along. A wisdom tradition is being handed down from father to son or more generally, from parent to child. **Each generation is responsible to take the lessons they learned from the generation that came before and to pass the tradition along – unchanged, unsullied, unadulterated – to the generation that comes after.**
    - Listen to the words being used that stress how important it is to keep this wisdom tradition whole and to pass it along with extreme care. V1 – *"Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive."* V2 – *"Do not forsake my teaching."* V5 – *"Do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth."*
  
- ❖ The consistent refrain of calling for the son to listen to his father's instructions – to receive this tradition and to not forsake it, to not forget it – this just reinforces the point we've been making. **That a major part of the process of growing in wisdom lies – not in the pursuit of novel ideas – but in the continual recollection and remembrance of familiar truths.** Of a tradition of wisdom that has been handed down to you.
  
- ❖ **Now I realize that, in some Christian circles, the word "tradition" has a bad rap.** Maybe you grew up in a very traditional religious context, and a particular tradition of Christian teaching was drilled into you in a way that felt very dry and lifeless. Maybe some of you felt like you were force fed the traditions of your old-fashioned parents or your hyper-conservative childhood church. And all you want now is to just study the Bible. You don't care about keeping tradition. You care about keeping God's Word, keeping Scripture.
  - But that's not how I'm using the word *tradition*. It's not something to pit against Scripture. **The tradition of wisdom we're talking about this morning doesn't stand apart from or in contrast to Scripture.** The father's teaching here *is* biblical teaching.
  
- ❖ **I don't know if you noticed, but what is notably absent in Proverbs 4 is any mention of God.** That stands out all the more when you consider how God has a central role in chapter 3. In both chapters, there's a father teaching his son, but in chapter 3 the LORD is all over the place.

- ❖ He's the one making us wise. Chapter 3:11 speaks of "*the Lord's discipline*". That word could also be translated "*the Lord's instruction*". So wisdom we're getting in chapter 3 is from the Lord. Well, the next instance of that word is in chapter 4:1 talking about "*a father's instruction*".
  - **That subtle parallel shows us that there's a connection between faithful parents teaching their kids and the LORD God teaching his people.** Proverbs 3 is giving you a view from above – where the LORD teaches us to walk on paths of uprightness (3:6). While Proverbs 4 is a view from below – where fathers teach their sons to walk on those same paths (4:11). The point is that it's describing the same activity.
  
- ❖ **When you put these two chapters together, the message is that God is ultimately the One teaching his people – as parents are teaching their children.** One of the primary means that the LORD uses to teach his truth and to make us wise in Scripture – is through the passing down of a wisdom tradition between one generation and the next.
  - **Parents, this means that God is using you and your instructions as a means of instructing your children.** It also means that it is primarily *your* responsibility to teach your kids biblical truth. To pass down a tradition of wisdom. Don't outsource that job to the church. Don't expect the children or youth ministry to do it for you. Take up your task. **Take what has been entrusted to you by the previous generation and faithfully pass on that tradition to the next.**
  
- ❖ Now, the content of that wisdom tradition is not spelled out here. If you want to know the kind of truths you should be passing along, that's what you'll find in Proverbs as a whole. **Here in chapter 4, the emphasis is not on the content of wisdom but on the dogged pursuit of it.** Look at v7, "*The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.*"
  - **Parents, teach your kids that the most worthwhile thing you can chase after is biblical wisdom.** It's not popularity or good grades. It's not an Ivy League education or a six-figure salary. It's wisdom. Biblical wisdom is the most worthwhile pursuit.
  
- ❖ Notice how, starting in v6, wisdom is personified as a woman. It's a common literary device in Proverbs since the instructions were originally directed towards a young man. **The point is that finding biblical wisdom is like finding a good wife.** Wisdom is like a woman of great worth.
  - Look at v6. If you don't forsake wisdom (if you stay true to her and don't chase after foolishness or falsehood), then she will keep you. If you love her, wisdom will guard you. Look at v8. If you prize wisdom highly, she will exalt you. Wisdom will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown (v9). **Protection and honor – these are the benefits of getting wisdom.** These are reasons to pursue it, and reasons to pass on a wisdom tradition to your children.
  
- ❖ Think about it this way: **As concerned as you are about your children growing up and marrying well – finding a good spouse – you should care even more that they find biblical wisdom.** We get so protective when our kids get to that age where they're interested in boys or girls, and their friends start coupling off.

- ❖ Suddenly, parents have to react. We have to give them the Talk or give them specific instructions on whether they can date. How long they can talk on the phone. Who they can text. How they can use social media. We are super concerned about what they're being exposed to and who is influencing them. To whom is their heart being drawn towards? Well, we should be concerned.
  - **But do we have greater concern that our children are growing up biblically wise?** Don't wait until they show interest in dating before you're concerned about what's influencing them or what their heart is being drawn towards. Don't wait until then before you have serious talks. Before you sit them down and instruct them in wisdom.
  
- ❖ As important as it is that your kids marry well, it's even more important that they get biblical wisdom. And one crucial way they get it – is by growing up in a home where a tradition of biblical wisdom is being passed down. **And it starts with something as simple as reading the Bible with your children.** Create a tradition in your home where the stories of the faith are regularly read and retold. It's not hard. It just takes some intentionality. But the payoff, as you can see in vv6-9, is well worth it.
  - **But what if you didn't have Christian parents to give you a tradition to pass down? Or what if you don't have kids or you're not married?** Is all of this irrelevant? No, Proverbs 4 still speaks to you, and points you to the family of God. If you're a child of God – if you've trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior – then you've been adopted into the family of God. In the church, you have spiritual fathers and mothers; spiritual brothers and sisters; spiritual sons and daughters.
  
- ❖ So who can pass down a wisdom tradition to you – if you don't have Christian parents? And then to whom can you pass that on to – if you don't have kids of your own? **Look for these people in the church. Look for discipling relationships.** Initiate them, especially if you're older in the faith. And especially if your kids are now grown and on their own, and yet you look around and see a sea of young people who were once your kid's age. And many of them don't have Christian parents or mentors who have passed down a tradition of faith – like you were able to do for your child years ago. No one has ever sat them down and given them biblical instruction – like the father in Proverbs 4 did for his son. So they're like spiritual orphans. **Perhaps God is calling you to take on that role of a spiritual foster parent.**

### **Keep Straight on the Way of Wisdom**

- ❖ So far, we've seen this image of a parent passing along a tradition of wisdom to a child. If we keep reading in Proverbs 4, there's a second image describing how to get wisdom. **It's the image of an ancient path – of an old road well-trodden by saints that have taken it in the past.** For some, that might include your faithful grandparents or even great-grandparents.
  - If you look at vv10-19, there's a theme about keeping to the old roads – about keeping straight on the way of wisdom. Listen to v10, *“<sup>10</sup>Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. <sup>11</sup>I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.”*

- ❖ As we saw back in chapter 2, there's been this imagery of two roads. **Life consists of two paths that you can take.** There's the path of uprightness, the path of justice, the way of the good, the way of wisdom (2:8, 13, 20; 4:11). And then there's the way of evil, the way of darkness, the crooked path, the path of the wicked (2:12, 13, 15; 4:14, 19). Those are the two ways, the two paths, the two roads we can take in life.
  - And here is that father is saying, "I've shown you the old road that your grandfather took. It's the road I'm walking right now. Keep to it, son. Don't stray." Look further down in vv25-27, "<sup>25</sup>Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. <sup>26</sup>Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. <sup>27</sup>Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil."
  
- ❖ **Basically, the father is saying, "If you want to get wisdom and grow in it, then stay on the straight path I showed you."** It's as simple as that. It's a straight shot ahead. Now it seems like it would be easy to stay on it. But when it comes to the way of wisdom, Scripture says, "*the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few.*" (Mt 7:14)
  - That's in contrast to the way of the wicked where, "*the gate is wide and the way is easy. . . and those who enter by it are many,*" but that road leads to destruction (Mt 7:13).
  
- ❖ This concept was famously illustrated in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. When Christian meets Evangelist for the first time, he asks how he can get this heavy burden of sin off his back. Evangelists directs him along a straight path. He points across a very wide field and says, "Christian, can you see that yonder wicket gate?"
  - Now at first, Christian can't see the gate, but he can see a shining light from the direction Evangelist is pointing. So he sees where he needs to go. He just has to stay on that path, cross that very wide field, and he'll be at the gate. Sounds easy enough.
    - **But it's not easy staying on the straight and narrow.** The path takes him through a miry bog called the Slough of Despond. And Mr. Worldly-Wiseman convinces him to take a "short-cut" past Mr. Legality's house and over Mt. Sinai. It doesn't go well. He gets to the gate eventually but not after much tribulation.
  
- ❖ The point is – we usually know the way we should go. We can see the old road in front of us. So you'd think it would be a no-brainer for which way to take. But the problem is – along that ancient path are hardships and trouble. And there are plenty of detours that look much easier and far more gratifying. **So we end up heeding worldly wisdom and ignoring the wisdom of our parents or spiritual mentors – and we step off the beaten path and take one of those detours.** And every time, it leads to destruction.
  - The path of the wicked looks gratifying, but according to v16, it leaves you restless. It says the mischief of the wicked keeps them from sleep. If you go down that road, you'll be restless until you get others to join you on this road of stumbling. V17 says that for those on one of these detours, wickedness becomes a substitute for food and drink. Doing violence becomes the only thing to quench your thirst – and yet it's never enough. In v18, we get this beautiful image of the righteous traveling on paths of ever-increasing a light. But the wicked, according to v19, stumble along paths of ever-enveloping darkness.

- ❖ The father is throwing out as many images as he can to paint the path of the wicked as unattractive as possible. And to give good reasons to avoid it. **But after all that, sometimes you just have to look at your kid (or that person you're discipling) and say, "Don't go there."**
  - That's what he does in vv14-15. There are six different ways here in which the father tells his son, "Don't go there. Don't take that wide and easy path." Listen, "<sup>14</sup>*Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil.* <sup>15</sup>*Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.*"
  
- ❖ **Now I realize for some of us that sounds really legalistic. Is that good advice for a parent to tell a child?** Give him a bunch of don'ts. A list of prohibitions. Paths he shouldn't take. People he shouldn't associate with. Things he should avoid and turn away from and pass on. Is that really what we should be telling people?
  - They won't listen. People won't listen when you warn them about associating with certain people. They won't care when you tell them to avoid certain paths or places – even if you list all the dangers. **Saying "don't go there" won't work. It won't change behavior.**
  
- ❖ Sure, we tell ourselves that. **But in the last few weeks, I'd say we've been pretty effective at getting masses of people to avoid certain paths and places – by warning them of what they might be exposed to.** We've told them that there might be a highly contagious virus along those paths or in those places. And that warning has millions of people around this world, in this country, in our city, in our church even – changing our behavior, breaking old habits, adjusting our lifestyles. All because we're afraid of catching a virus.
  - **All the while, we seem to forget that a far deadlier, far more contagious virus is already out there, and it's found everywhere.** The Bible calls it sin. It's plagued mankind since ancient times and claimed countless more lives than all the outbreaks in human history combined. And sin doesn't just kill the body – it kills the soul.
  
- ❖ **But do we apply the same vigilance and caution as we do towards the coronavirus?** Are we willing to make the same changes to our behavior in order to avoid the path of the wicked? Are we willing to adjust our habits and lifestyle in order to not walk in the way of evil?
  - If not, then it probably means that we don't really believe sin is all that dangerous. **We're more scared of catching the coronavirus than being exposed to sin.** But if we took the Bible seriously – if we really believe what it teaches about the wages of sin being death – then the father's instructions in Proverbs 4 make perfect sense. You would avoid the path of the wicked in the same way you would avoid traveling to China right now. Or for some, you would even avoid Chinatown right now. Well, in the same way, avoid the path of the wicked.
  
- ❖ **But of course, when it comes to sin, avoidance can't be the ultimate solution.** Quarantining the wicked won't be enough. Because, if you haven't realized it yet, wickedness has already penetrated our hearts. We are all sinners, and we're all on a path of destruction.

- ❖ But thanks be to God that there is a cure to this particular virus. **We have the gospel – the good news that Jesus has come to give his body and shed his blood to make a cure, to make a way to reach the path of righteousness.** If you receive Jesus by faith – if his blood and righteousness cover you – then you will be saved from the curse of sin.
  - And if you are saved – if you are a Christian whose eyes have been opened to see the wickedness of sin – then why would you take that detour? Keep to the old roads, Christian. Stay on the ancient paths well-trodden by the faithful and the wise.

### Keep Wisdom Guarded in Your Heart

- ❖ So we've seen the image of a parent passing down a tradition of wisdom and then the image of an ancient path used by the wise – lastly, in the third section, there's this image of guarding your heart. Look at vv20-21, and you'll see a theme of keeping wisdom guarded in your heart. *“<sup>20</sup>My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. <sup>21</sup>Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart.”* And look at v23, *“Keep your heart with all vigilance.”*
- ❖ Now this idea of keeping or guarding your heart is not about purity. I know when we typically speak of guarding your heart, it's in the context of romantic relationships and purity. **But here, the focus is not on keeping bad stuff out of your heart. It's about keeping good stuff in.** The father is telling his son to guard wisdom in your heart. To keep it from being lost or forgotten.
  - If you notice in vv20-27, the father starts naming body parts that his son should employ to stay on the right path and not forget his teachings. *“Incline your ear.” “Keep your heart.” “Put away . . . crooked speech [from your mouth].” “Let your eyes look directly forward.” “Ponder the path of your feet.”* **The father is saying: Apply everything you've got. Put your whole self into keeping wisdom guarded in your heart.**
- ❖ What does this actually look like? **How do we practically keep wisdom in our hearts? By memorizing. By the constant recollection of biblical teaching.** We've seen this already. In Proverbs 3:3, the son is told to bind his father's teachings around his neck and to write them on the tablet of his heart. And here, in chapter 4, the son is to let his heart hold fast to his father's words; to not forget them; to not forsake them. He needs to memorize those words.
- ❖ In C.S. Lewis' book *The Silver Chair*, the two children Jill and Eustace are sent by Aslan on a mission in Narnia to rescue Prince Rilian – who has been kidnapped by the Emerald Witch and held prisoner in her underground lair.
  - Now before he sends Jill into Narnia on this mission – Aslan (the Christ-figure) is with her on top of a mountain. And he gives her very clear instructions on how to conduct her quest for the lost prince. **Aslan tells Jill to memorize four Signs (or clues) that will help her and Eustace to find Rilian.** Then, he makes her repeat them over and over again until she's able to recite them perfectly.

- ❖ And before he sends Jill off to Narnia, Aslan leaves her with this warning. *“Remember, remember, remember the Signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night, and when you wake in the middle of the night. And whatever strange things may happen to you, let nothing turn your mind from following the Signs. And secondly, I give you a warning. Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the Signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay not attention to appearances. Remember the Signs and believe the Signs. Nothing else matters.”*
  
- ❖ Friends, here in church – here in a worship service – the air is clear and so is your mind. **But when you step back into the world – into your home, into your circle of friends, into your workplace or your campus – that’s when the air gets thick and your mind gets confused.** It’s so easy to get off track. So remember the Signs and believe the Signs.
  - By *Signs*, Lewis was referring to biblical teaching. He’s exhorting us to remember the Law of Moses and the teachings of Jesus like the Sermon on the Mount (which were both given to us on mountains!). **Make a practice of memorizing Scripture.** Hide God’s Word in your heart. Say it to yourself when you wake and when you lie down. And whatever strange things may happen to you on the road, let nothing turn your mind from following the Signs. *“<sup>25</sup>Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. . . . <sup>27</sup>Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.”*